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ABSTRACT

Through personal experience, an adult educator came to the conclusion that adults come to a course labeled "Teaching Adults" primarily to learn about themselves, their own self-development, and their own process of learning. Only secondarily do they come to learn the ways and means of communicating knowledge and ideas to others. In the first teaching experience, the educator focused the course on helping adult educators become good facilitators of learning. A combination of mini-lectures, discussions, small-group work, and films was used to deliver content. During the course a new participant interest emerged, namely that adult educators wanted to learn about themselves. The course was revised to combine the experiential learning model and Knowles' andragogical ideas that are based on learners' needs. To meet the altered course objectives, a change in process was demanded. Personal reflection, the putting of theory into practice in work situations, and case studies were used. For most participants the discussion on adult learning styles was particularly significant, especially regarding the need for a variety of activities in any learning experience. (YLB)

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# PUTTING THE HORSE BEFORE THE CART: TEACHING ADULTS ABOUT TEACHING ADULTS

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PUTTING THE HORSE BEFORE THE CART:
TEACHING ADULTS ABOUT TEACHING ADULTS

I believe that adults come to a course labeled Teaching Adults primarily to learn to understand themselves, their own self-development, their own process of learning, and only secondarily, to learn the ways and means of communicating knowledge and ideas to others.

How did I come to this belief? Quite simply, I came to this conclusion as a result of my own personal experience teaching several sections of a course labeled Teaching Adults. I became convinced of this conclusion during my first experience of teaching this course, and all subsequent experiences either teaching the same course or being involved with adult educators on a consultative basis have only succeeded in reinforcing my first conclusion.

I will now share with you my initial teaching experience and then point out some ways I subsequently used this experience to redesign a program, an experience that might prove helpful to others charged with designing similar programs.

Three years ago, I considered myself a knowledgeable person in the field of adult education. At that time, I was studying for my doctorate in educational theory with a specialization in adult education; in fact, I was in the final stages of writing my dissertation. I had had many dealings with adults in an academic setting, and I believed that I had sufficiently steeped myself in current adult education literature to be knowledgeable about most topics related to the subject. Even though I did not verbalize the thought, I considered myself a sort of expert in the field of adult education and prided myself on my understanding of adult learning. How naive these assumptions of mine really were did not strike home until my first experience teaching adults.

During my first meeting with the course participants, they expressed an interest in many things. Some of their stated reasons for coming to the program included the following: building competence and confidence in dealing with adults, acquiring knowledge of learning theory and the practical application of this theory, sharpening skills as a facilitator of adult learning. Generally their expressed interests had a common denominator; these adult educators expressed the need to become good facilitators of learning. This fact delighted me because I judged that I was just the right person to satisfy these needs, and I told them so.

For this reason, they had high expectations and hopes that they would learn how to do a better job in their respective teaching roles. They wanted to leave the sessions with an infallible bag of tricks that would enable them to be an instant success with their adult students. They hoped to acquire those skills that would prepare them to properly motivate their charges, to assist the adult learners persevere in their pursuits, and ultimately, to help bring their charges to their desired purpose. These expressed objectives appeared to be quite rational, and most important for me, the facilitator, they were congruent with what I expected to deliver. Against this backdrop, I set out to present my package.

I was delighted with the first sessions, and the feedback sheets that I collected each time supported my elation. Among other comments, the participants expressed enthusiasm and interest, enjoyed the comfortable and relaxed atmosphere of the sessions, claimed that their curiosity was aroused and that learning was happening, and strongly indicated that they were glad they came to the sessions. For the delivery of content, I used a combination of mini-lecture, discussion, small-group work, and films.

Since I wanted this teaching experience to be important to me in terms not only of success, but also in terms of my personal learning, I spent a great deal of time after each class reflecting on what had really happened during the sessions. This exercise was difficult to do since I found that I had to step back from the level of success and try to be as objective as possible in assessing the experience, a process that is not easy because successful programs are generally not subjected to further examination.

It was during this reflective process that I began to become aware of a new set of learning needs, not directly expressed but nevertheless present in the group. These needs in a sense were insidious; they defied verbalization but, in spite of their intangible nature, they began to haunt me. They also created in me a heightened sense of awareness calling for an openness, on my part, to the unspoken and even unformulated demands and expectations of the group.

As a consequence, I found myself going to each succeeding class with sharpened listening skills. I had become convinced that I was about to uncover something really significant. Before too long, the truth began to dawn and the hidden agenda began to surface. One theme kept echoing through all my listening - "how do I?" - "how am I?" These questions related to such things as: learning - how do I learn?; developing - how am I developing as a person?; experiencing - how do I experience something and make it my own? These queries and others similar began to arise as significant issues for the participants. The emergence of these new interests did not necessarily mean that they were no longer interested in the facilitation process; they were, but only to the degree that they first understood themselves as learning persons. In other words, the personal issue had become paramount for them.

At the end of my first section of the course, the overall evaluations were good. On the final evaluation sheet, in answer to the question, "what topics would you like to explore in the future?", most participants replied that they would like to know about themselves, about how they learned, and about how they developed as a person. This information only confirmed what I had already become aware of during the duration of the course - adult educators wanted primarily to learn about themselves.

Why these questions were being asked and why these issues were being raised to the level of personal awareness under these particular circumstances is a matter open to interpretation. Havighurst (1976) might explain this need in terms of the "teachable moment" or Pine and Horne (1969) might give as a reason for this demand, "the discovery of personal meaning." Regarding this matter, however, I have my own opinion.

It seems to me that when adults teach adults, they find themselves on a different level of interaction, a level with their peers rather than on a level of dominance or superiority. This new kind of relationship calls for two things. First, it demands a different level of knowing. Knowledge about content and how to deliver content is not enough; knowledge about the subjective nature of human behavior also becomes very important. Second, it calls for a re-examination of educator value choices. Choices that were congruent with behavior in the teaching of children, whether these were gained from actual classroom practice or remembered from childhood experiences, are no longer valid; new choices are demanded. For some, this kind of alteration calls for a significant change in ideas and beliefs about teaching and learning. In this instance, the kind of change called for is well described by Mezirow (1978) as a "perspective transformation", a change process which calls for a "redefinition

of problems and the need for action and new criteria for assigning values and making judgments."

In light of my experience and my opinion about this same experience, it seemed a logical step that I go back to the drawing board and redraft my course outline in terms of this new information; a task I accepted as a challenge. In the end, my revised course became a mixture of the experiential learning model which has been around since the time of Kurt Lewin and the androgogical ideas of Knowles (1970) which are based on the needs of the learners. I like to describe my revised process as "putting the horse before the cart", because I became more and more convinced as I worked on the redraft that I had in the first instance, put the "cart before the horse." Originally, I had stressed the role of the facilitator, and the revised version emphasized the facilitator as a person.

Because of this major change and shift in emphasis, the overall objectives of the course had to be significantly altered to suit the new needs. This alteration demanded a change in process, and I set about reaching my objectives in a number of different ways. For example, during a class devoted to the maturation process of adults, I asked the participants, prior to their next class, to outline their own maturation process as perceived by themselves. In addition, they were asked to highlight their major life transitions and then to describe in their own words their most significant learnings during these particular points in their life.

The next class then began with a sharing of this material in small groups, especially the material identified as significant learning. This session was followed by a presentation of some current developmental theory, and then the participants went back to their small groups to discuss the implications of

such knowledge for the facilitation of adult learning. By beginning with the subjective nature of their own behavior, then comparing this information to current literature on the topic, and then drawing conclusions about practice and, in some cases, putting some of the theory into practice in their own work situations throughout the duration of the course, the participants were left with less unanswered questions about the topic and a higher level of satisfaction.

The case study method was also used with a high degree of success. The participants were asked to identify with the various people involved in the studies, to think of themselves in the same situation, to identify some of their own personal reactions to the situation, to try to come to grips with these reactions in terms of their own learning, to determine if their reactions today would be the same as they would have been maybe ten years ago, and then to make recommendations for the transfer of this knowledge to practice.

For most of the participants, the discussion on adult learning styles was, perhaps, the time of their most significant learning. The work of Kolb and Fry (1975) was found to be particularly significant for this purpose. After using the Learning Style Inventory, many of the participants had a real eye-opener. For the first time in their lives, they clearly understood that people learn differently. Perhaps they realized this fact before, but they had never stopped to reflect on the significance and meaning of this kind of information. This knowledge explained for them a great deal about their own learning process and the learning experiences of others. They realized that all adult learners, themselves included, come to the learning situation with their own choices and likings, their own individual patterns.

In addition, this information confirmed for them the need for a variety of activities in any learning experience. Their opinions on this matter are well described in the words of Brundage and MacKeracher (1980):

> Programs should include a variety of activities, each of which facilitates a different learning or cognitive style. The teacher must be able to use a model of teaching which is responsive to individual styles. (p. 111)

This new information also helped the participants in the examination of their educator value choices. Since new behavior is not learned without questioning old values and creating new ones, many of them had to ask themselves some serious questions about their espoused theory regarding adult education and their theory in practice. Were they being consistent? If not, why not? For many, new behavior required the development of a new set of governing variables or personal values. Most participants recognized that such a change would take a much longer time than the duration of the course. At least some of them were willing to make a beginning.

Comparing my first experience teaching this course with my succeeding experiences in implementing the revised version, I must admit that this new kind of approach to learning did not significantly change the content of the course; we still learn about teaching adults, but what changed was the process which was drastically altered to include such things as personal reflection and case studies. For me, the significance of this new approach is best described in the words of Maslow (1971) when he suggests, "looking within oneself for many of the answers implies taking responsibility," in this particular instance, adult educators learning to take responsibility for both themselves and other adult educators.

Not only were the final evaluations of the revised course either very good or excellent, but I had a strong sense that the primary objective of the course was being achieved. The participants were learning to better understand themselves as persons.

From the evidence of this experience, I believe that the Delphi motto, "Know Thyself" is as valid today as it was years ago. By "putting the horse before the cart," I helped in some small way to satisfy this primary need.

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